DAWN

OPINION

Taliban fissures

THOUGH reports of fissures within the Afghan Taliban are not new, a recent *BBC* story has detailed some of the major differences that exist between the so-called Kandahar and Kabul factions of Afghanistan's ruling set-up. The former grouping is seen as loyal to the edicts of Taliban Supreme Leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, while the faction in the Afghan capital is led by the likes of Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Yaqoob. As per the *BBC*, a leaked audio recording reportedly of Mullah Akhundzada dating back to January 2025 warned against divisions within Taliban ranks, with the hard-line movement's supremo asserting that differences could lead to the emirate's "collapse". Taliban leaders, however, have downplayed the divisions, describing them as differences of opinion within a family. One incident cited by the official British outlet as evidence of divergences between Kabul and Kandahar was last year's internet shutdown, ordered by Mullah Akhundzada. Within days of the edict, Afghanistan was back online, as the Kabul faction apparently defied their leader and had the internet restored.

Differences among the Taliban are natural; the movement has various power centres. While Mullah Akhundzada may reign supreme, Siraj Haqqani has considerable power, being the scion of veteran Mujahideen commander Jalaluddin Haqqani. Mullah Yaqoob, son of ex-supremo Mullah Omar, also has a significant following, particularly amongst younger Afghans. Whereas Mullah Akhundzada is based in his Kandahar redoubt, living a near mediaeval life, the Kabul leaders are relatively urbane men, hobnobbing with global leaders in the Gulf, Russia, China, etc. The latter faction knows that Afghanistan cannot prosper without shedding some of the rigid curbs ordered by the supreme leader.

The Kabul leaders are hardly progressive but they do hold relatively more moderate views compared to Mullah Akhundzada and his inner circle. In the current context, this may be the best bet to reintegrate the country with the rest of the world. For example, the Kabul grouping reportedly favours education for girls beyond primary school, and some members of this faction have previously been disciplined for their views. While major internal strife among the Taliban is unlikely, it is possible that the Kabul leaders may try to further assert themselves to implement more 'pragmatic' polices, without rocking the boat, thus giving Afghans a little more freedom. They should also revisit the policy of hosting foreign terrorist groups, including the banned TTP, and impress upon Mullah Akhundzada that cross-border attacks by these groups on Pakistan and other neighbours will further isolate Afghanistan. Although a 'Kabul Spring' is hardly in the offing, limited change in Afghanistan could be in the air.

Iran climbdown

A DEVASTATING conflict pitting Iran against the US and Israel may have been averted for now, but unless there is a long-term resolution addressing the underlying tensions, particularly between Tehran and Washington, a fresh conflagration may not be too far off. What started out as protests by traders against Iran's plummeting economy in late December morphed into large anti-government demonstrations. As some of these protests turned violent, the security forces responded harshly, resulting in the deaths of several protesters; the actual numbers are hard to verify due to an information blackout in Iran. However, the Islamic Republic's external foes, primarily the US and Israel, sought to manipulate genuine domestic rage against economic distress into a regime change operation. At one point, war seemed imminent, with President Donald Trump saying that the US was "locked and loaded". Yet on Jan 14, the US leader rowed back, claiming that Iranian officials had told him that protesters would not be executed. He even expressed gratitude to Iran. While Mr Trump's foreign policy decisions may seem inconsistent, some saner voices within the US administration might have cautioned against attacking Iran. Such a move would have sent global energy prices in a tailspin, while American troops in the region, as well as Israel, could have been within the reach of Iranian missiles. There are also reports that America's Gulf allies advocated de-escalation. Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin also called upon Israeli and Iranian leaders to "quickly de-escalate".

Yet the core issues between the US and Iran remain. Primarily, Mr Trump's 'maximum pressure' campaign has brought the Iranian economy to its knees, causing immense pain to ordinary citizens. His threats to slap further tariffs on any country that trades with Iran will only make matters worse for Tehran. If the US and its Western allies want Iran to negotiate in good faith, this economic war must be brought to an end and Tehran should be given sanctions relief. The scheme of regime change in Iran should also be dropped. If there is to be change in Iran, it is the Iranian people that should be heralding it, not foreign states. Yet Iran's ruling elite must also revisit their policies both in the short and long term. This should include reprieve for protesters, as well as efforts to address popular demands, and better manage the battered economy.

Cyber dangers

THE sharp rise in cybercrime in Pakistan, discussed in the National Assembly last week, shows that what was once an occasional nuisance has evolved into a pervasive threat, affecting citizens' finances, reputations and even liberty. With the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency receiving more than 150,000 complaints in a single year, the scale of the problem is stark. Lawmakers drew attention to scams that have become depressingly familiar: fake traffic challans, messages by fraudulent entities masquerading as banks and phishing attempts exploiting public trust. Even the NA Speaker said he had received such messages. More alarming, however, were revelations that some individuals who engaged with fake online communications later found themselves entangled in blasphemy or anti-state cases. Pakistan's experience mirrors global trends. Global research highlights how cybercrime now encompasses not only financial theft but also harassment, stalking, coercive control, misinformation and radicalisation. Motivations range from monetary gain to political manipulation. As digital technologies entrench themselves, the opportunities for misuse multiply — faster than the laws and institutions can respond.

The interior ministry's claim that reforms are being introduced in the NCCIA is encouraging, as are directives to telecom companies to strengthen SIM issuance processes. Yet institutional tinkering will not suffice. Pakistan's cyber laws require serious updating to tackle new forms of digital harm and the increasingly sophisticated tactics used by criminals. This overhaul must be undertaken with care. Cybercrime laws should not become tools to stifle free expression, criminalise dissent or widen the net of vague offences. The history of digital regulation in Pakistan offers ample reason for caution. Protecting citizens from online crime is a legitimate and urgent state responsibility. But it must be pursued through precise laws, transparent enforcement and respect for fundamental rights. The rising tide of cybercrime demands thoughtful reform, not overreach.

BY MALEEHA LODHI

A disordered world

Countries have to navigate a no-rules world amid great uncertainty and volatility.

THERE is no doubt President Donald Trump has shaken up the world order by his disruptive and unilateral policies. From upending the global trading system to launching military attacks in the Western Hemisphere and beyond, he has shown contempt for international law and the sovereignty of other nations. For someone who vowed to end wars and not start new ones, his aggressive actions and rhetoric suggest the contrary.

Trump's 'America First' foreign policy means riding roughshod over others. His deputy chief of staff, Stephen Miller, aptly described the Trumpian worldview when he poured scorn on a "rules-based system" and declared: "We live in a world, in the real world, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power." That means the exercise and projection of raw American power, whatever the consequences.

What kind of world is emerging from this? To be sure, Trump is acting in an environment already characterised by a fragmenting global order and increasing disregard for international rules and norms by other big and regional powers. The use of hard power by countries has become all too frequent in pursuit of a 'might is right' approach. Trump is reinforcing or sharpening these trends and pushing the world into a Hobbesian state of lawlessness.

Today, the world has increasingly become one ruled by impunity. In a speech to the General Assembly over a year ago, UN Secretary General Ant nio Guterres said the world had entered "the age of impunity". He was prompted to say this by the Israeli aggression and desperate situation in Gaza but he was also referring to the growing number of countries acting this way. "They can invade another country, lay waste to whole societies" and "thumb their nose at international law", he said, pointing to the fact that this "age of impunity" is everywhere. He is, of course, right. This era of impunity is reflected not just in the US assault on Venezuela and bombing of Iran but the genocide carried out by Israel in Gaza, its military attacks on neighbouring countries, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and India's military strikes against Pakistan. None of these powers thought their actions entailed much cost and they faced no international accountability.

If international institutions were designed to deter and check such behaviour that isn't happening in today's no-rules world. Multilateralism and multilateral organisations have been under stress for well over a decade. But the attitude of big powers, especially Trump's conduct, has accelerated this trend and magnified the pressure. The UN's paralysis and ineffectiveness are evident from its failure to stop the genocide in Gaza, the war in Ukraine and end other conflicts, such as in Sudan. It's growing irrelevance is laid bare by its role as a bystander in wars and crises, unable to perform its core responsibility, albeit due to big power politics and clashing interests. The result is a loss of faith in multilateralism with trust in global institutions at a record low. The recent withdrawal by the US from 66 international organisations including 31 UN entities is another setback for the multilateral system and will further weaken it.

The world has now entered an era of a 'new great game' which involves intense resource tussles between the big powers. It is reflected in the competition between the US and China over rare earths and critical minerals essential for semiconductor and defence industries. In this regard, the US under Trump is trying to catch up with China, which has built a virtual monopoly, having made strategic investments in these sectors over decades, including in Africa. China has a near-monopoly in the extraction and processing capacity of rare earth minerals, which are used in electronics, electric cars and military weapon systems including fighter jets. Last year, it used its leverage in the rare earth elements global supply chain to push back against US tariffs. Beijing imposed restrictions on exports of rare earth minerals which forced Washington, faced with an industrial shutdown, to back off and lower tariffs.

The Trump administration is now frenetically seeking to reduce its dependence on China by developing alternative sources of supply. It is hosting G7 ministers this week to discuss this. It struck a minerals deal with the Democratic Republic of Congo, which sought US mediation for a peace accord with Rwanda. Washington also signed a mineral resources agreement for joint investment with Ukraine.

Of course, the resource battle is not limited to minerals even if that is an important new front. It rages over oil, as Trump's action in Venezuela shows, over technology and other vital commodities. It is a throwback to the past when colonial powers competed for resources and occupied countries to pillage their resources. What some analysts have called America's "resource imperialism" has familiar echoes of the past.

The Middle East continues to figure as a region of conflict and volatility that is consequential for international peace and security. Beyond Israel's genocidal war on Gaza, which has temporarily paused under Trump's peace plan, the region is witnessing a high-stakes contest for regional dominance. But instead of the old confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Middle East is facing tensions between Gulf states who are competing on many fronts and are engaged in proxy wars to establish their regional ascendancy. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates erupted into the open over Yemen. The two countries back different sides in Sudan and have divergent interests in Libya and Syria. UAE's close ties with Israel adds another dimension to the geopolitical competition. The US shift in policy priority to China and disengagement from the Middle East over the years created a power vacuum that Gulf states are trying to fill in their contest for influence. The KSA-UAE power struggle is, above all, about who will become the main trade and investment hub. KSA is now planning a military coalition with Egypt and Somalia to contain UAE's regional power. Their rivalry is destabilising for the region and compounds its challenges.

With geopolitical tensions and geoeconomic confrontation intensifying across the globe this points to a disordered world. It challenges countries to navigate a rule-less terrain in an environment of great uncertainty and volatility. ■

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.

BY UMAIR JAVED

Shortcuts to growth

RECENT chatter suggests there is significant pressure on the government to move beyond macroeconomic stabilisation. With economic activity languishing, rumours of ministerial changes have popped up as well, as if somehow specific personnel are the only thing standing in the way of six per cent growth. Despite IMF tutelage, these pressures will not be easy to stave off. Something will eventually give.

What are the usual pathways to growth? In Pakistan's case, reducing interest rates and easing up of import restrictions coupled with some sort of a tax let-off usually generates economic momentum based on consumption. This has been the script for several decades. Beyond the brief rush that it provides, its other outcomes too are fairly straightforward.

There is increased pressure on scant reserves, a widening fiscal deficit and downward pressure on the currency. In some sequence and combination, this usually leads to devaluation and inflation, followed by a return to the IMF's doorstep in the face of looming default. Macroeconomic stabilisation ensues through a throttling of economic activity via increased interest rates, import restrictions, and higher taxes. In other words, a move back to square one.

For the generation gaining adulthood in the 2000s, this particular sequence has already played itself out four times, neatly coinciding with a transfer of power between different actors. The fundamentals are still the same suggesting that the planned pursuit of growth would be a fifth repetition of the boom-bust cycle in just under two decades.

What is this 'fundamental' that has stayed the same? If we reduce growth to a simple arithmetic problem of finding enough dollars to spend, then nothing has truly changed on that front. In fact, dollars are even harder to find today than they were a few years back. The standard source of foreign exchange, ie, exports, are stagnant. Domestic capitalists find it difficult to both make things that the rest of the world wants and getting the rest of the world to buy the thing they make.

Global cheap credit liquidity has dried up, there are no substantial geostrategic rents to be obtained, no Sino or Saudi benevolent patrons who can shower billions, and no queue of dollar-armed investors waiting to set up shop in the country. The only saving grace here are the common people, who ship themselves abroad to labour in harsh conditions for the sake of their families. Their earned billions are ventilating an economy otherwise plagued by asphyxiation.

This cursory, yet fairly standard, picture of the economy shows that in the current scenario, with all things being the way they are, there is no straightforward path to growth that doesn't see us back to square one in a year or so.

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Mainstream, technocratic answers to breaking this bind are both familiar and banal. 'Reform' is the word most frequently thrown around. The power sector needs to be reformed so that the cost of making stuff (to sell to the world) can go down. The economy needs better documentation so that the burden of taxation on the formal sector (that makes things and employs people) eases up. The size of the government in terms of personnel and their regulatory footprint needs to be reduced so that there is more money available to be spent on enhancing human capabilities (and productivity).

Maybe some of these standard technocratic prescriptions will take place in my lifetime (I am approaching 40). They may even lead to some of the results they're supposedly meant to produce, but there's little guarantee either way. There are other prescriptions too, more radical ones that involve mass mobilisation and the redistribution of means and resources to people in order to boost domestic production and consumption. However, the likelihood of such a path being traversed is even lower.

Either way, past experience suggests that implementing even the most benign reforms is costly: the intra-elite political conflicts they produce are untenable, and most Pakistani decision-makers, civilian and military, are reluctant to go through with it. Why? Because politicians, even those with dubious mandates, have constituencies and status quo beneficiaries as benefactors; and the establishment, apart from being a status quo beneficiary itself, wants a resuscitation of legitimacy in the shortest time possible, which can't be squared with the long gestation period of technocratic reform.

So, instead, we'll likely see some *jugaar* that opens up space for economic activity and staves off difficult questions in the short run, passing them on to the next set of faces in charge. Two such shortcuts come to mind.

The first was alluded to by Khurram Husain in his piece last week — an external liquidity injection of the geostrategic/ geopolitical variant. Whether that comes through defence pacts and a backdoor to a new normal in the Middle East (or in the immediate region) is moot. If it were to transpire, it might give the Pakistani government some breathing room without changing too much domestically.

There is a second shortcut too; a domestic variant, being eyed and talked about for some time now. This one involves forcibly changing the nature of fiscal relations between the centre and the provinces through an amended NFC. By starving the provinces and holding onto more resources, the centre will be able to reduce its uptake of more debt, bring down interest rates, increase development spending and maybe even offer tax rate reductions for a short period of time.

The boost in growth will be welcomed, even if its wholly temporary. But in the process, a long-standing 'irritant' — the devolution of significant resources away from the centre - will also be solved. And it doesn't take much to predict in whose pockets these freshly retrieved resources at the centre will end up. ■

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